The Laugh of the Medusa on the Borderlines

Introduction by Leila Sujir

The two essays presented here--"The Medusa's Field Notes/Toward an Archaeological Model of Art History" by writer Sarah Murphy and "Locating the Art Work in the Great Divide" by curator and art critic Christine Conley--represent two excerpts from a panel discussion held in Edmonton in September 1986,"The Laugh of the Medusa on the Borderlines," on the place of women in the art world and in art history.

The panel, co-sponsored by the Women's Program at Latitude 53 Gallery and the University of Alberta, raised the question: where are women located in the art world? Is it on the borderlines, the edges, the periphery? Art history is made through the interplay of forces and "key players"--the artists, the curators, the critics and reviewers--who, along with the art works, form a system which brings art work to our attention. But what art is given a place, a space within which to exist: recognition, visibility, recognition?

Curators and critics, through what they choose to represent, are forming a canon: they are determining, to some extent, what will be remembered and what will be recorded in art history. When a canon is established--that is, the naming of

those who are of central importance and the naming of those who will be studied--where will the women in art be located? Will it be on the borderlines again?

The language of a society represents the values of a society; Dale Spender, in her book, Man Made Language, points out that women in our society occupy a male-minus position semantically. That is, the female is without a place, is without representation in language, other than the place of the "not male."

Curator Christine Conley in "Locating the Art Work in the Great Divide" examines the place of women artists in terms of the presentation of the art work to an audience and in terms of representation. She suggests that we revise our notions of presentation of art work by blurring the boundaries between different audiences, different communities: when the art can be located somewhere other than the "art world" (the gallery setting), the audience can cross boundaries. "The divide" she refers to in her essay title is a reference to the divisions which she sees within the different feminist communities, a division which can, atleast momentarily, be bridged.

Sarah Murphy in "The Medusa's Field Notes/Toward an Archaeological Model of Art History" speaks of the way the lines of influence in art history are presented as the

"fatherline" and asks: how can women enter this line? She speaks both of the place of women in art history as a negative space, an absence which provokes the recurring question, "why are there no 'great' women artists?" and she comments on the displacement of women artists from the collective memory, our history. Murphy proposes another model,"Athena--or--Art Herstory as Archaeology," a model which allows us to construct a space, a place within which women artists can be represented.

This representation is an important factor shaping women's identities. Nicole Brossard, a Quebec writer, remarks that in order to write, "one must know that one exists," among other things, and also, "in order to be aware of oneself as an individual, that is, a unique being in the world, one must first of all recognize one's membership in a group or community" (180). This representation of women--made possible when we make links, a chain of consciousness, a shared memory and thus a history--makes a culture "in the feminine" a possibility and makes a possibility, as Brossard points out, "of knowing one exists."

Murphy in her essay notes that Athena, in one version of the myth, was born out of the head of Zeus after he had swallowed her mother, Metis, the Medusa. Women have often been swallowed, have often been seen but curiously have not

been visible except as the source, or the place to be colonized, or the image--the object of the gaze. The figure of the Medusa--subject of the gaze, feared because her visual power, "her seeing" could turn men to stone--can be situated on the borderlines. Seeing--she talks back to the center. Helene Cixous, a French writer, in her essay,"The Laugh of the Medusa," speaks of the way woman has been placed--has become the dark continent--but notes:

> The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.--It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths; between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on...You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (255)

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Works Cited

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